

Walter Brueggemann, one of my favorite theologians, when reflecting on this time in the church year, writes the following, “Advent does not begin in buoyancy or celebration or in a shopping spree. The natural habitat of Advent is a community of hurt. It is the voice of those who know profound grief, who articulate it and do not cover it over.”

Yes, that is our habitat as we experience Advent, especially this year, and I have been deeply feeling the hurt, the pain, and the grief. Ours are voices of those who know profound grief. We are in a very dark place at the present time and it is imperative that we articulate the pain and grief and not cover it over. It is also imperative that we listen to those who speak **truth** as we experience this grief. We are living in a culture in which “truth decay” (a term recently coined by President Obama) seems to permeate every facet of our life, and it is critical in this dark time that we listen to those who witness to the **truth**, not those who spew forth toxic conspiracy theories, lies and misinformation. Right now, in the depth of our pain, it is vital that we listen to the scientists and medical professionals because **they** are the ones who point to the truth and point us to what we need to do to eventually reach the light at the end of this very dark tunnel. **They** are the ones who testify to the truth, a truth to which we must listen

because that truth to which **they** testify is ultimately life-giving during this dark time.

I say this because, when looking at today's gospel reading, at the time when John appeared on the scene, the people were hurting and facing much suffering. And, this character, John, enters the scene as one who comes bearing **witness** to the **truth**. In today's reading, we meet John, the first human mentioned in the Gospel of John. This lone character, John, is the star of today's show and he is a man **sent** from God. It is important to note that he is **not** identified as John the Baptist as we find in Matthew's gospel. He is **not** identified as John the baptizer as in Mark. And, he is **not** identified as John the son of Zechariah as in Luke. He is simply identified as **John**. He is **John the Witness**. While he is described as doing some general baptizing here and there, a careful read of **this** gospel writer's story of Jesus' baptism reveals that John does not even baptize Jesus. His primary role is not as one who baptizes but one who **testifies** to the light coming into the world. In John's gospel, this John character is a very human **witness** to a cosmic event. You see, God is about the business of ordering a new creation, a new presence of light in the world, but this effort **necessitates** a fellow human to point **to** the presence of this

light. Otherwise, human as we are, we might not see it. So, that human is **John**.

Smack dab in the middle of the out of this world, beyond time and space beginnings of this fourth gospel, interrupting the unfolding of a truly cosmic birth story, John appears, testifying to the light. Well, his testimony brings on all kinds of questions. So down from the capital come the interrogators, and the result is a fierce press conference. “Who do you think you are?” “Do you think you’re the messiah?” “Are you representing yourself as Elijah?” “Why are you baptizing like this?” “What do you say about yourself?” The questions ricochet like rifle shots bouncing off walls. The aim of these questioners is to reveal some **damaging** information, some **falsehood**, to show that this threatening figure of John is just a cracked and broken cistern like the rest of humanity. After all, just maybe he *does* think he is Elijah incarnate, or worse, fancies himself the actual messiah and comes seeking fame and glory. If so, you can be certain John’s message will be tried, twisted, and tested like the message of a politician on the campaign trail. He will likely be dubbed a damaged and flawed human being, full of worldly ambition and self-delusion.

But John’s answer is quite surprising. “It’s **not** about me,” he replies. “I’m pointing beyond myself to one who comes after me, to the Lamb of

God. My whole life has now become a **gesture** to what God is doing to shake the foundations of the status quo and re-create the world.” You see, because John has a holy vocation, not merely a human ambition, the fear of exposure before the glare of interrogation simply vanishes. **He does not fear!** He seems to say, “Find all the flaws you want and smoke out all the vanities you can find. The meaning of **my** life is not in what you think about **me**, but how you respond to **the one to whom my life points.**”

John identifies himself in, with, and by his relationship **to** the light, to the One who is coming, to the One known as Jesus, to the One who is shaking the status quo and recreating the world. And, whereas the One who is coming, this One who is recreating the world, defines himself as "**I AM,**" John is clear to say, "I am **not.**" He is **not** the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet. He is **not** the light that shines in the darkness. Yet, even in his resolute claims about who he is **not**, who he **is** and why he is here is defined **by** and inseparable **from** the presence of the Word made flesh in his midst. He knows nothing but to articulate his identity and live out that identity in **connection** to Jesus' identity. John's sole vocation in this fourth gospel is to **bear witness to the Word made flesh**, to bear witness to the **light**. In fact, in this gospel, John is the **lead** witness on Jesus' behalf.

It is fascinating to note that the verb “witness” is used **thirty-three** times in the gospel of John but only **twice** in the entirety of the other three gospels. John’s role in this gospel is to recognize the **true** light when it appears and to **testify** to that light. John does **not** fear as he stakes his very life on his call to testify to the light so that others may recognize it and believe – that is, recognize, trust in, and commit themselves to the light. John truly understands his role and who he is. He is **not** the Messiah. That job has already been filled. He simply lives his life pointing **to** the Messiah.

Like the man whose name was John, the church, and that means each one of us, is sent **into** today's world as a **witness**. And, when we look at today’s reading and John’s witness, we find we may characterize this witness as **public, certain, and humble**. These qualities are most certainly in tension with the spirit of **our** age. Most people today regard religion as a private matter. Most people want to keep their personal beliefs quiet, staying safe and cocooned in their comfortable and all too often misinformed bubble, **not** getting their hands dirty because any other way of living is too **risky**. Furthermore, certainty and **truth** are also **shunned** in these postmodern times. Yes, “truth decay” permeates our culture and we are all victims of our own perspectives and the bubbles in which we live.

**Truth** has become so relative – who can ever know for sure whether anything is true or not? In fact, a focus on **truth** is something that seems harder and harder to find. Still, we who claim to follow Jesus are **audacious** enough to believe that the **gospel is true**, and that it must be **lived out** in our daily lives and **proclaimed boldly – publicly and confidently, without fear**. The trick is to bear witness to **this truth** with **humility**. For John, and for each of us, that means directing people **away** from self and toward Jesus.

In this Advent season, our reading on this Sunday calls us to trust God’s living Word to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and to **live out** our faith by trusting **in** and pointing **to** the One who is greater than ourselves. As we do that in this present time, we acknowledge our pain and the fact that we presently live in a world where, as Walter Brueggemann says, “the kingdom of death is surging – in the virus, in the failed economy that breeds starvation for many, in our ready embrace of brutality, [in the hatred and racism that plagues our culture], and in the surge of anti-neighborly, fearful greed. This is the truth that is right in front of us. It is **not** however, the **whole** truth. It is **not** the truth entrusted to **us**. The truth entrusted to us is that there is a ‘**coming one**,’ [the One to whom we point] who in actual bodily ways rescues from the power of death.” Come, Lord Jesus, come!